

# Ruth First lecture: Hammerl remembered, Motlanthe warns against censorship

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Fourteen war images of the late photographer [Anton Hammerl](#) stood idle - powerful and melancholic - at the entrance of Wits University Great Hall last night, Wednesday 17 August 2011, reminding everyone that the author - just like [Ruth First](#), the woman they came to honour - fought until the end to expose abuse of power, repression, suffering and injustice.



First's *Libya - the Elusive Revolution* somehow connected with Hammerl because that is where he was killed. Deputy president [Kgalema Motlanthe](#), who arrived 30 minutes late, said: "Before proceeding, I would like to acknowledge the presence of the family of the late South African photographer, Mr Anton Hammerl.

"It is probably ironic that Ruth First, the person whose life we are honouring tonight, wrote about the Libyan Revolution and its possible pitfalls. Then, 29 years after her murder at the hands of an illegitimate regime, a South African journalist [Hammerl] is killed in the 'Second Revolution' in Libya."

## Killed by letter bomb

First was a SA journalist, researcher, writer, political activist and scholar, married to [Joe Slovo](#). She was killed in Maputo, Mozambique, on 17 August 1982, by a letter bomb deliberately sent by the apartheid regime.

Both Hammerl and First's incredible talent and dedication resulted in producing excellent work in which social injustice and a cry for freedom and peace were immortalised in a multi-dimensional approach. While First, an investigative journalist, produced up to 15 stories a week, Hammerl selflessly put his life in line to inform communities about the realities of war and repression.

And both lives were cut short by the prophets of censorship, who ensured that they never exposed their evil deeds again. Last night, the deputy president warned against censorship, one danger he said First spent her life fighting.

He said, "She had envisaged a South Africa where [freedom of expression](#) was as essential as the air we breathe. Today's democratic S stands as a monument to her quest for this noble goal. Accordingly, we must commit never to betray these ideals, now or in the future."

### **Using media space to empower ordinary people**

Motlanthe hailed First for playing the role of an organiser in the media context, using media space to empower ordinary people.

Hammerl was reportedly killed by soldiers loyal to the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, a close ally and friend of the ruling African National Congress (ANC). Analysts blame SA for not capitalising on its leadership on the African continent to hammer strong and much-needed African solutions for African problems.

[Eusebius McKaiser](#), 2011 [Ruth First fellow](#), told the audience that SA's public diplomacy was a complete failure, and that its foreign policy's blueprint took a huge blow during the Libyan crisis.

McKaiser slammed SA for not investing effectively in its foreign policy and in the African Union, which he described as an organisation lacking capacity - a weakness he said was hampering efforts to solve the continent's problems using African solutions.

### **"Not inconsistent"**

However, Motlanthe said, "SA's foreign policy today is not inconsistent with the internationalism of Ruth First. Although the changing geo-political makeup of the world has imposed certain imperatives both on our country and our continent since Ruth First's demise, the character of our foreign policy remains consistent with the progressive vision of the world that Ruth First heartily embraced."

## **ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA: @SIKITIMEDIA**

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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